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# GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE: A CRITIQUE

**Abstract**

The present paper discusses the philosophy of 'nonviolence' (ahimsa) of Mahatma Gandhi, which he devised as a weapon to fight the brute forces of violence and hatred, hailing it as the only way to peace. Gandhi based his philosophy of nonviolence on the principle of love for all and hatred for none. He thought violence as an act caused to a person directly or indirectly, denying him his legitimate rights in the society by force, injury or deception. Gandhi's nonviolence means avoiding violent means to achieve one's end, howsoever, lofty it might be, as he firmly believed that the use of violence, even if in the name of achieving a justifiable end was not good, as it would bring more violence. He firmly adhered to the philosophy of Gita that preaches to follow the rightful path, remaining oblivious of its outcome. Gandhi used nonviolence in both his personal and political life and used it first in South Africa effectively and back home he applied it in India against the British with far more astounding success, as it proved supremely useful and efficacious in liberating the country from the British servitude. However, he never tried to use it as a political tactic to embarrass the opponent or to take undue advantage of his adversity.

**Keywords: Nonviolence, Truth, *Gita, Acharanga Sutra,* Disobedience Movement, South Africa, Indian National Movement, etc**

Mahatma Gandhi (1969-1948) was a voracious reader of books on multiple cultures and religions, which exposed him to diverse ideas of the world. Being a liberal Hindu, he had great

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regard for all the religions, as he thought that they all lead to the same goal. The teachings of Jesus Christ inspired him greatly as it preached love for everyone, even towards one's enemies and advocated the need to strive for justice. However, the most important element of his philosophy is the concept of truth (satya) and nonviolence (ahimsa), which he considers interdependent traits and of whom the latter is perhaps closest to his heart, though in his philosophical discourse he places truth at a more prominent position, when he titles his autobiography as *My Experiments with Truth.* In fact, he considers truth as an end, while nonviolence as a means to achieve it. Gabriel says, "In its simplest form…truth is of the highest value as an end, and that nonviolence is valuable precisely because it serves as fallible beings' best means of achieving truth." (Gabriel, 2011) Since Gandhi believed in the maxim that means should justify the end and not the vice versa, he steadfastly adhered to nonviolence disregarding all its shortcomings at the practical plane, saying, "My faith is as strong as ever… here is no hope for the aching world except through the narrow and straight path of non-violence. Millions like me may fail to prove the truth in their own lives; that would be their failure, never of the eternal law (Merton, 1965: 74-75). The philosophy of nonviolence, being a part of the Indian religious tradition for centuries, is rooted deep in the Indian ethos. The Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist texts advocate nonviolence as the way of life, symbolized, as Chapple (1993) says, by the "absence of the desire to kill or harm" (10). The Jain text Acharanga Sutra, emphasizing upon the fundamental need for nonviolence enjoins: "All beings are fond of life; they like pleasure and hate pain, shun destruction and like to live, they long to live. To all, life is dear." (11). Inspired, obviously, by these lofty ideas, Gandhi adopted nonviolence as the basis of his thoughts and mission and made it the ideal of his life.

It is often lamented that Gandhi did not leave a systematic record exposing his ideas thoroughly. However, his writings, published under the title *Gandhiana*, running into one hundred volumes, make it possible to understand the basic tenets of his philosophy with reasonable amount of confidence. It reveals that Gandhi has the credit to rediscover nonviolence (ahimsa) as a weapon to fight the brute forces of violence and hatred, to redeem 'Satya' (Truth), hailing it as the only way to live in peace. Here it is noteworthy that Gandhi brought with in the ambit of violence any act that overrode the will of a person directly, or indirectly, denying him an equal status and securing his consent through deception, coercion, or injury. In other words, to Gandhi violence implied a separation from others, placing oneself on a high level "where one's will is treated as

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more worthy to prevail, or one's goals more worthy to be achieved." On the contrary, nonviolence means to shun using any violent means for achieving one's end, howsoever, lofty it might be. In addition, it also implies love and respect towards all, and the duty to oppose the evil without indulging in the coercion or deception of the evildoer. (Gabriel, 2011) In fact, Gandhi bases his philosophy of nonviolence on the principle of love for all and hatred towards none. Elaborating the point Shepard (2002) says that Gandhi's non-violence "believed in the need to convince opponents of their injustice," to win their friendship and to remain prepared to suffer or die "to see them converted to love." (4) As for its application, Gandhi uses nonviolence in both his personal and political life, and it entirely goes to the credit of his genius, remarks Nanda, "that he transformed, what had been an individual ethic, into a tool of social and political action." (2001) Gandhi, while subscribing to the philosophy of nonviolence, firmly believed that the use of violence, even if in the name of achieving a justifiable end was not good, as it would bring more violence. Commenting upon this aspect, Merton (1965) observes, "In Gandhi's mind, non-violence was not simply a political tactic which proved supremely useful and efficacious in liberating his people from foreign rule (but) the spirit of nonviolence sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself." (6) Thus, adhering to the famous gospel of the Gita that one ought to follow the right path remaining "indifferent to success or failure," Gandhi wanted everybody to strive for realizing the right goal through the right means, which meant by resorting to nonviolence that implied harming none.

Besides, Gandhi wanted to achieve truth which he considered as the ultimate end through nonviolent process, He thought that one ought not to bypass that process, howsoever justifiable one's end might be lest it should be analogous to the act of a misguided scientist "who is so certain of the truth of his or her conclusions…that he or she does whatever it takes to ensure that his or her views become the dominant theory in the field, even where this requires violating scientific methodology-falsifying data, bribing journal editors, sabotaging others' experiments, etc." (Gabriel, 2011) Gandhi attached great importance to the worthiness of means and criticized those who thought otherwise. Bose (1948) in this regard quotes him as having stated:

> They say 'means are after all means.' I would say 'means are after all everything,' as the means so the end. There is no wall of separation between means and end. Indeed the Creator has given us control over means, none over the end.

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> Realization of the goal is in exact proportion to that of the means. This is a proposition that admits of no exception (37)

Gandhi was of the opinion that "To use violence to achieve our ends can go awry in at least two ways that reflect an implicit denial of our fallibility. One, we might be mistaken in our choice of ends to pursue. Two, we might be mistaken in our expectation that violence will bring about these ends." (Gabriel, 2011) He also thought that since violence perpetrates evil; one has to shun it in order to avoid a probable future evil. Bondurant (1958) commenting on the point says:

> To proceed toward the goal of Truth, truth in the absolute sense, the way must lead through the testing of relative truths as they appear to the individual performer. The testing of truth can be performed only by strict adherence to ahimsa, action based upon the refusal to do harm, or, more accurately, upon love. (25)

It was, in fact Gandhi, who put the weapon of nonviolence to test for the first time during his twenty-year long fight against racialism in South Africa beginning from 1894, where he pleaded for the removal of iniquitous curbs and disabilities imposed upon the Indian immigrants in Natal and Transvaal. Back to India he joined the Indian freedom movement, and decided to use nonviolence to fight against the British rule. The main tactic he adopted in this regard was Satyagraha, which, according to Miller (1964), means "Soul-Force" or "The power of truth" (61). In fact, Satyagraha was the practical extension of the philosophy of ahimsa, itself, which meant sticking to one's ideals steadfastly, but without hatred. Curiously, Horace Alexander has described vividly as to how Gandhi used to plead Satyagraha and nonviolence before his opponent i.e. the British Government, saying "On your side you have all the mighty forces of the modern state, arms, money, a controlled press, and all the rest. On my side, I have nothing but my conviction of right and truth, the unquenchable spirit of man, who is prepared to die for his convictions than submit to your brute force. I have my comrades in armlessness. Here we stand; and here if need be, we fall." (http://www. mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/gandhiand_non.htm) Gandhi employed the Satyagraha technique in 1920 following the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, when he organized nation-wide public demonstrations to withdraw, what Wolpert (1991) calls, "Indian support from the vast, monstrous Machine of Empire until it ground to a halt." (63) Although the British Government dealt with the strike sternly, leading to the arrest of thousands of Indians, it hit the British hard. Unfortunately, the peaceful agitation took an ugly turn as it

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turned violent in 1922, when a bunch of agitators set a police station at fire, killing two dozen police officers. The incident came out as a rude shock to Gandhi, who not only called off the entire Satyagraha, but also apologized for, what he himself called, his "Himalayan blunder," regretting for having misjudged his followers of understanding the true spirit of non-violence. (64)

Eventually, the Satyagraha took the shape of civil disobedience and non-cooperation with the evil symbolized by the British Rule, which required breaking particular unjust law unmindful of the consequences. The Salt March of 1930, known also as the Dandi March, was probably one of the greatest successes of Gandhi's civil disobedience movements. It is worth recalling that the British government had established a monopoly on the salt production, leading to the imposition of massive taxes on it. Therefore, on April 6, 1930, Gandhi at the head of large number of followers reached the coastal village of Dandi, marching about 241 miles on foot from his village, and gathered salt there, which the British Government of India treated *ultra virus*. (cf. Herman, 1999: 99-101) Another facet of Satyagraha was the non-cooperation with evil, which required one to boycott British products, stop working for British employers, pull out children from the British schools, and stop supply of services to the British and paying taxes, rather than breaking any law. (Shepard, 2002: 3) Gandhi though lived in a world dominated by violence and hatred, valued nonviolence the most. He was prepared to compromise anything, but nonviolence, which he thought as the only way of living in peace. It is thus obvious that Gandhi's belief in nonviolence was absolute, and he did not think of replacing it even with truth, which he though valued as the ultimate end. The thoughts of Gandhi, like other thinkers of the world, were inspired by what had already existed and flew from his mind spontaneously. His claim to originality, however, lies in the fact that he had unique way of blending the ideas he imbibed from different cultures and thoughts and giving them the touch of novelty. Thus, to understand Gandhi's philosophy properly one has to start "with an understanding of how he used the concepts of truth and nonviolence, and the connection he made between them as end and means." (Gabriel, 2011)

As for the relevance of the philosophy of truth and nonviolence, one finds that the Indian National Movement adopted Gandhi's programme of Satyagraha based on nonviolence as its guiding principle and achieved complete success, as Gandhi's success against the British Rule in India by achieving the independence in 1947 *ipso facto* symbolized the success of his policy of

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nonviolence. It was, however, a sheer paradox that owing to an ugly turn of event some vested elements crept in and generated a religious discord between Hindus and the Muslim minority in India, resulting in the creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim state. Consequently, on the eave of independence India turned violent, with the widespread distrust and hatred generated between the two communities, giving rise to riots all over the country, which took a heavy toll of about a million lives (Wolpert, 1991: 69). This led certain people into inferring that Gandhi's non-violence had failed, accordingly, many of his critics, both British and Indian, did not approve Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, though for different reasons, as a few of them regarded it as a 'camouflage,' while the others treated the same as sheer 'sentimentalism.' However, Gandhi refused to deviate from his chosen path, who during those turbulent days spent his time in the most violent areas, when "Each night he preached Peace and Love and prayed…walked from village to village through the heart of that violent madness…preaching Ahimsa." (Wolpert, 1991: 69) which, however, appears to be a willful presumption on the part of those radical elements, who favoured the cult of violence all along the freedom movement. B.R. Nanda also criticizes the radical elements, who thought it prudent for the Indians to take advantage of the precarious condition of the British in the World War II, alleging that "force would only yield to force…it was foolish to miss opportunities and sacrifice tactical gains for reasons more relevant to ethics than to politics." (http://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/ gandhi__non.htm)

As for the relevance of Gandhi's nonviolence to-day, there is no unanimity of opinion on the question, and the efficacy of the policy of nonviolence came under thorough questioning both during the freedom movement and thereafter. Even the closest aides of Gandhi like Nehru, Patel and others, who in the independent India were responsible to administer the country, were apprehensive of its success, as during an era of armament, and international rivalry its strict adoption was fraught with huge risk. However, in the face of Gandhi's uncompromising stance on the point, and due to their own unflinching loyalty towards him, they did not question the superiority of his principles, though at the same time they could not wholly translate it into action. Recently, Sundeep Doughal in one of his write-ups, "The Utter Irrelevance of Gandhi?" regards Gandhi as "...infinitely more interesting, one of the most complex and contradictory personalities of the century." (http://www.outlookindia.com/ article.aspx? 213306) The above remark, if read in isolation might appear innocuous, but if seen in entirety the same seems to be loaded with sarcasm, as in this context the critic quotes certain views, wherein the philosophy of

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Gandhi, particularly the nonviolence, has been attacked severely. At the first instance, he quotes Novelist G.V. Desani, who ridicules Gandhi for his idealism by translating literally his full name, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into English as "Action-Slave Fascination-Moon Grocer," adding that "he was as rich and devious a figure as that glorious name suggests." (ibid) Further, Doughal also cites Salman Rushdie, a controversial writer himself, ridiculing the idealized Gandhi, by calling him as a "darned dull, little more than a dispenser of homilies and nostrums." For, he would say, "An eye for an eye will make the whole world go blind," and if asked, what he thought of Western civilization, he would give the celebrated reply "I think it would be a great idea." (ibid) According to Rushdie, Gandhi first believed that "the politics of passive resistance and nonviolence would be effective in any situation, at any time, even against a force as malign as Nazi Germany," but later he revised his opinion, saying, "That while the British had responded to such techniques because of their own nature, other oppressors might not." (ibid) This implies that Gandhi himself conceded that his nonviolence had no universal appeal and if it had succeeded in dealing with the British, it was largely due to their positive reactive nature. Rushdie in his concluding remarks, however, opines, "These are hurried, sloganizing times, and we don't have the time, or worse the inclination to assimilate many-sided truths. The harshest truth of all, he says, is that Gandhi is increasingly irrelevant in the country whose 'little father'-Bapu - he was." (ibid) Obviously, by way of the above views Doughal wanted to convey that Gandhi's policy of nonviolence is far from relevant in the present day context, as it suited to the adversaries, rather than serving ones own interests. Similarly, criticizing Gandhi Arthur Koestler described his attitude as one "of passive submission to bayoneting and raping, to villages without sewage, septic childhoods, and trachoma."

(http://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/gandhi_and_non.htm) The above criticisms are one sided and show how the motives and methods of Gandhi have often been misunderstood. However, Doughal, while quoting the hostile views expressed as such on Gandhi's policy of nonviolence, also refers to the note in Rajghat visitor's book by General Musharraf, wherein the visiting Pak President, wrote, "Never has the requirement of his ideals been felt more severely than today, specifically in the context of Pakistan-India relations. May his soul rest in eternal peace?" (http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx? 213306) In fact, Gandhi preached and practiced nonviolence as he considered violence crude and his rejection of violence stemmed from choice, not from necessity. However, it is but only an irony of fate that the policy of

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nonviolence is presently facing the worst of its ordeals. It is not long ago that the world witnessed a series of crises in Korea, the Congo, the Vietnam, the Middle East, and South Africa with an unending trail of blood and bitterness. Besides, there is constant threat of a thermo-nuclear war and people world over feel turning towards Gandhi's ideas and techniques for succor.

To sum up, the practical aspect of Gandhi's idealism, as contained in his philosophy of nonviolence shows that it has a universal appeal irrespective of time and space. It earned worldwide acclaim, and soon after Gandhi's death in 1948, a delegate speaking at the United Nations predicted, "The greatest achievements of the Indian sage were yet to come"; Vinoba Bhave also said, "Gandhi's times were the first pale dawn of the sun of Satyagraha." (http://www.mkgandhi.org/ nonviolence/gandhi _and_non.htm) It is no wonder, therefore, that the great leaders of the world like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela, took inspiration from him in their struggles for civil rights in their respective countries. The American President Barack Obama in his numerous statements before the people and the press of late confided repeatedly of his indebtedness to Gandhi and his philosophy of nonviolence. However, to practice nonviolence is not a cakewalk as it requires enormous courage, "the courage to resist injustice without rancour, to unite the utmost firmness with the utmost gentleness, to invite suffering but not to inflict it, to die but not to kill." (http://www.mkgandhi.org/ nonviolence/Gandhi and_non.htm) Since very few can have that courage and conviction, in the post independence India there is only the example of Vinoba Bhave, who could claim to have followed Gandhi in letter and spirit, though he too had to opt out of the politics as well as the government to follow the noble path. But how many of us are prepared to make such sacrifices is, therefore, the million-dollar question.

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